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AUTHOR Traupmann, Jane
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ABSTRACT

Developmental theorists have suggested recently that at midlife women often want to reduce responsibilities to family and concentrate on self-development and growth, which earlier in their lives would have seemed to them selfish and therefore not acceptable. The aim of this comparative study was to determine if women returning to school at midlife differ from their nonstudent peers in ways which would provide some insight into the developmental changes women may go through in that period of their lives. One hundred-six women, aged 50 to 73, half of whom were university students, the others being primarily home-oriented nonstudents, responded to questions about health, happiness, self-concept, and aging. The results of the study show that those who have found a channel for the development of self, in this case through university studies, feel healthier both mentally and physically. On the other hand, those whose focus continues to be on family at midlife (a time when family members may be emotionally if not physically absent) are more distressed--have trouble sleeping, feel a lack of energy, and experience more physical ailments. Obviously, conclusions about the causes of the differences cannot be made from this study since it is neither experimental nor longitudinal. Yet, the findings do concur with what developmental theorists have described for women at midlife. (Author)

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MIDLIFE WOMEN IN CONTINUING EDUCATION:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Jane Traupmann

Center for Research on Women

Wellesley College

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Paper presented as part of a symposium, "Life Stages and Their Role in Programs for the Continuing Education of Women," at the American Educational Research Association meetings, New York, March 22, 1982.

ABSTRACT

Developmental theorists have suggested recently that at midlife, women often want to reduce responsibilities to family and concentrate on self development and growth, which earlier in their lives would have seemed to them selfish and therefore not acceptable. The aim of this comparative study was to determine if women returning to school at mid-life differ from their non-student peers in ways which would provide some insight into the developmental changes women may go through in that period of their lives. One hundred-six women, aged 50 to 73, half of whom were university students, the others being primarily home-oriented non-students, responded to questions about health, happiness, self concept and aging. The results of the study show that those who have found a channel for the development of self, in this case through university studies, feel healtheir both mentally and physically. On the other hand, those whose focus continues to be on family at midlife (a time when family members may be emotionally if not physically absent) are more distressed--have trouble sleeping, feel a lack of energy and experience more physical ailments. Obviously, conclusions about the causes of the differences cannot be made from this study since it is neither experimental or longitudinal. Yet, the findings do concur with what developmental theorists have described for women at midlife.

Recent college enrollment data indicate that older women are returning to school in increasing numbers. In 1979, nearly 1.3 million women, aged thirty and over, were enrolled in United States colleges and universities (Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, 1980). The number of older women going back to school has risen each of the last seven years. For example, from 1973 to 1974, the number of women college students over thirty-five increased by 32% (from 416,000 to 548,000) and, in absolute numbers, exceeds that of men thirty-five and over by 100,000 (Tittle & Denker, 1977). These figures are expected to continue to increase rapidly because the number of women in their middle years is increasing so rapidly. It is projected that between 1990 and 2010, as the post-World War II baby boom reaches middle age, the number of women aged 45-64 will be approximately 36 million (Cahn, 1978).

Institutions of higher education have not been very responsive to the needs of re-entry students (Ekstrom, 1972), especially the needs of women re-entries (Rice, 1976; Wells, 1974). Continuing education programs available to the older woman remain largely peripheral to the university, and are usually inadequately financed and under-staffed (Mulligan, 1973). In a recent Carnegie report, "Three Thousand Futures: The Next Twenty Years of Higher Education", there was almost no mention of the "adult" student despite demographic shifts, i.e., a shrinking pool of 18-24 year olds and a growing population of individuals over 40. The lack of responsiveness on the part of universities may be due in part to lack of systematic information on this group. Recently, Jarold Kieffer, Director of the National Committee on Careers for Older Americans, pointed out the need for an imaginative inquiry into the ways and means to help universities respond effectively to the

growing interest of the older population in further education (Keiffer, 1980).

An effective response on the part of universities to their older students' needs and interests requires careful study of this "non-traditional" student population, since their life experience is very different from that of typical 18-24 year old students. The present report describes one such study of women in their 50's and 60's who were enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate study at a large midwestern university.

With few exceptions (e.g., Doty, 1966, 1970), the literature which addresses the issue of continuing education for women (CEW) focuses primarily on women in their 20's and 30's and their use of the available CEW programs (Tittle & Denker, 1977). For example, Astin (1976) studied 649 women participants in CEW programs, and 541 former participants (women who had been enrolled in a CEW program 3 to 5 years earlier but were not currently enrolled). Astin found that the typical re-entry woman student is a 36-year-old white woman from a middle-class background who had received relatively high grades in high school and who listed an "interest in learning" as her reason for returning to school. She listed conflicting demands at home as the area which was most problematic in her experience as a student. Since Astin's sample consisted largely of women with school age children, we do not know if women whose children no longer live at home would cite such conflicts as a major difficulty.

A number of studies have documented that academically the "mature" woman is a good student (Cagiano, Geisler, & Wilcox, 1978; Clements, 1974; Roelfs, 1975) and is usually very motivated to adjust to her environment to fulfill her own needs (Doty, 1966), although the adjustment requirements

may be extreme and unfair (Holmstrom & Holmstrom, 1974).

Much of the existing literature on CEW, while informative, displays two major limitations. The first, already mentioned, is that the age range of the students is too narrow and in many cases eliminates the 45+ group whose numbers seem to be increasing more rapidly than the 30-45 group. Second, virtually all of the studies lack adequate control groups and thus no conclusions about the differences between women who choose to return to school and those who do not so choose can be drawn. We agree with Tittle and Denker's (1977) conclusion in their review of the literature on re-entry women that there is a need for demogrphic studies in order to examine the enrollment data by sex and age group. But there is also a need for comparative studies of students and non-students in order to examine the impact of schooling on adult development.

Today's midlife women are facing significant changes in many spheres of their lives. Usually by the time a woman reaches the age of 50, the children are "out of the nest". Often the husband is absent as well, either physically absent because of divorce or death, or emotionally absent. If, like most women of her age cohort, she was socialized to believe that her roles as wife and mother were most important, the reduction of these roles is likely to leave her relatively isolated socially and emotionally (Lopata, 1978). However, a growing number of midlife women are actively making choices to form new definitions of themselves. For many, this choice is returning to school to continue their education.

Psychologists recently have suggested that at midlife women begin to move out of their family-oriented lives into a more independence-seeking life (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Gilligan & Notman, 1978). They feel ready, after

so many years of existing for others, their husbands, and their children, to put their energies into themselves and not feel that they are being selfish. If midlife women find opportunities to pursue their desire for success outside the home, it is likely that they will feel a new surge of energy and *joyeux de vievre* not enjoyed by their home-oriented peers.

The goal of this exploratory study was to compare older learners to non-student women in their age cohort in terms of various social and personality variables as an attempt to understand the developmental changes women may go through in later life. We hypothesized that the student group, as compared to their non-student peers, would feel younger, happier about their lives, would have a more positive self-image, and would feel healthier, both mentally and physically.

METHOD

The present study was designed to identify the differences, if any, between midlife women whose current focus is primarily on their student role (Continuing Education Women, CEW) and those who are primarily home-oriented (Comparison Group). Because women could not be randomly assigned to the student and homemaker groups, care was taken to insure, to the extent possible, that the women in the two groups, while differing in current focus, were matched on relevant background variables, i.e., age, marital status, and area in which they lived.

Respondents

The CEW Group. The respondents in the CEW Group were 53 of the 101 women 50 years old or older who were enrolled as students at a major midwestern university in Autumn, 1980. All 101 received a letter in October 1980, describing the study of middle-aged and older women students, and an 18-page

questionnaire with an addressed and stamped return envelope. After a follow-up letter, mailed two months later, a total of 53 completed questionnaires were returned (52.5%).

The Comparison Group. The Comparison Group was a subsample of the 400 randomly selected women interviewed in 1978 and 1979 as part of the McBeath Institute's Aging Women Project (AOA Grant #90A-1234-01.02) at the University of Wisconsin, directed by Vivian Wood and Jane Traupmann. The aim of the posthoc selection of the Comparison Group was to identify a set of women who matched the CEW Group on three demographic variables, age, marital status, and home town, and whose primary orientation was within the home. Ideally, this would include only those who reported that their work status was "keeping house". However, there were not enough such cases in the Aging Women data set. Thus, other categories of work status were included: those "doing volunteer work", "unable to work", and "working part-time". Full-time workers were excluded. Evidence that women in the Comparison Group were primarily home-oriented comes from their answers to a question about career vs. family orientation; most, almost 80%, indicated that their families came first.

Questionnaire

The 18-page questionnaire included a number of questions from the Aging Women Project (e.g., demographics, measures of mental and physical health, self-concept, and questions about family and friends), as well as a number of open-ended questions about their experiences as a "non-traditional student" (e.g., reasons for returning to school, 1, 2, and 4 year forecasts for themselves, problems encountered in their studies or their social life as a student). In addition, the following scales were included:

Career vs. Family. The relative importance of career and family was measured with the following items:

> Some women consider their job as primary in their life. Others say their role as homemaker is primary. How is it for you?
>
> 1 = Job/career is most important
> 2 = Job/career is somewhat more important than being a homemaker
> 3 = Job/career is as important as being a homemaker
> 4 = Being a homemaker is somewhat more important than my job/career
> 5 = Being a homemaker is most important

Measure of physical health. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 100-point scale (very poor = 0-15, poor = 16-35, fair = 36-65, good = 65-85, and excellent = 86-100) how their physical health had been in the last year.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our major predictions were that the CEW women, because they had found an opportunity for self-achievement and fulfillment, would feel younger, happier about their lives and would feel healthier, both mentally and physically, than would the Comparison Group women. Each of these predictions will be examined in turn.

Age Attitudes

There were no significant differences between the two groups on subjective age (I think of myself as young = 1; middle-aged = 2; elderly = 3; old = 4) or on the importance of age (My age is: one of the most important factors in my life = 1, to: not at all important in my life = 5). This may be due in part to the high level of physical activity in which both groups engaged regularly. Both groups reported regular and frequent participation in some kind of physical exercise.

Life Satisfaction

No differences were found between the two groups on happiness and general satisfaction with their lives. Both groups were between "somewhat" and "very" happy and satisfied with their lives. Thus, the hypotheses that women returning to school would feel younger and happier with their lives than women primarily at home were not supported.

The differences between the two groups emerged in the realms of health and self-concept.

Physical Health

The CEW women reported that their physical health in the past year was significantly better than that reported by the Comparison Group ($F_{1,104} = 8.55$, $p<.004$). While the mean health score was "good" for the Comparison Group, $\bar{X} = 78.7$, s.d. = 19.6), it was in the "excellent" range ($\bar{X} = 88.0$, s.d. = 12.6) for the CEW Group.

Mental Health

Measure of mental health. A modified version of the Hopkin's Symptom Checklist 90, developed by Derogatis (1973), was used to assess mental health. Commonly used in survey research, this measure reveals an ordering among people based on the relative degree of depression they report. It is not intended to be used as a clinical diagnostic tool. (See Essex, Klein, Jones, & Benjamin, 1979, for a more complete description of the measure.) The checklist includes 30 symptoms, such as feeling blue or feeling low in energy, and asks respondents to indicate on a 5-point scale, ranging from not at all to extremely, how severe or distressing each has been for them lately.

The Comparison Group, as compared to the CEW Group, reported significantly

more mental distress, as measured by the mean score on the 30 symptoms ($F_{1,102} = 3.99$, $p<.05$), and by the mean number of symptoms described as "quite a bit" or "extremely" distressing ($F_{1,104} = 3.50$, $p<.06$), though the latter finding was of only borderline significance. Further analyses revealed that the symptoms which were significantly more severe for the Comparison Group than for the CEW Group were: feeling nervous, trembling, heart pounding or racing, feeling low in energy or slowed down, feeling everything is an effort, trouble falling asleep, awakening in the early morning, and sleep that is restless or disturbed. Four other symptoms, (1) feeling scared for no reason, (2) blue, (3) hopeless about the future, and (4) no interest in things, were of borderline significance. Many of these symptoms are characteristic of depression, the "common cold of psychiatric practice" (Silverman, 1968). The incidence of depression is very high among midlife women. Gutmann (1980) recently noted that the most common presenting problem of midlife women seeking some kind of psychiatric treatment is depression. He suggested that it may be due to self-inflicted feelings of guilt and self-reproach for wanting to break from familial responsibilities and pursue a more expanded and self-expressive existence. If desires for self-improvement and growth, a natural reaction to an "empty nest", (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Bowers, Steidl, Rabinovitch, Brenner, & Nelson, 1980; Notman, 1980) are felt but are thwarted by feelings of guilt and self-reproachment, it is not surprising that the women oriented toward an empty nest begin to feel depressed.

One symptom was significantly more severe or distressing for the CEW Group--feeling pushed to get things done. However, the comments from women

attempting to combine the role of student and homemaker suggests that such pressure is simply what is expected from student life. The source of the pressure to get things done is not mysterious but rather a very real part of the responsibilities undertaken by students with some family obligations. Several earlier studies have found similar problems with lack of time or "role strain" in younger returning women students (e.g., Van Meter, 1976; Berkove, 1979; Hooper, 1979).

Self Concept

Measure of self-concept. The measure of self-concept comes from a complex model of social behavior, the Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB) model, developed by Benjamin (1974, 1979). The third surface of the SASB model describes the results of turning the focus on others inward on the self, and therefore, represents treating the self as have important others.* The two axes of the model, affiliative behavior and autonomous behavior, define the four quadrants of the model. The end points for the two axes of the model are, for the affiliative axis: love, cherish the self vs. torture, annihilate the self, and for the autonomous axis: happy-go-lucky vs. control, manage the self. The measures derived from this model which were used in the present study, the affiliation and the autonomy scores, indicate the extent to which the respondent endorses the self affiliative and the autonomous items.

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*Surfaces 1 and 2 of the SASB model represent respectively, focus on others or how a respondent treats significant others, and focus on self or how a respondent feels she/he responds to significant others.

There were no differences between the two groups on the measure of self esteem or self love. The scores for both groups were quite high and differed from each other by only a few points.

The significant difference appeared in the measure of self-autonomy or self-control. The CEW women controlled and managed their time significantly more than did the women in the Comparison Group. A further analysis of the cluster scores resulting from the SASB model revealed that the two groups differed significantly on Cluster 1, "the spontaneous self" ($F_{1,102} = 5.60$, $p<.02$) with the Comparison Group scoring higher than the CEW Group. High scores on this cluster indicate that the respondent tends to "let important choices, thoughts, issues, options slip by without paying much attention; drifts with the moment, has no particular internal direction, standards; is happy-go-lucky, content with 'here today, gone tomorrow'; feels free to let basic nature unfold as it will; and in a free and easy way, lets self do what comes naturally and everything goes well enough to suit self" (Benjamin, 1979).

To sum up, the experience of being a university student in midlife seems to be a mixed blessing. It does not produce new-found feelings of youth and happiness any more than does a life focused on home and family. It does not significantly increase happiness or self-esteem. However, it does seem to be associated with feeling more healthy physically and experiencing fewer sleep disturbances and other symptoms of mental distress. Also the university students are more self-disciplined--less free and easy with themselves--than the non-students. The pressures they experience in attempting to combine their student and family obligations apparently are, overall, less distressing than a life oriented solely on family. Whether these differences existed before the CEW group enrolled at the university or

emerged as they became more acquainted with their new role cannot be determined from this study, since it is neither experimental or longitudinal Yet, the findings do concur with developmental theorists' speculations about women at midlife. That is, an opportunity to forge a new life, focusing on personal development rather than on family, should produce positive change for midlife women.

Or as a 51-year-old graduate student in History succinctly put it: "Fell in love upon approaching age of 50, coincident with menopause. Realized this was a desire for a new life, new mate, so...stayed with the old mate and went back to school."

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